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SOPHOCLES' THESEUS

Did Greek tragedy show 'increased responsiveness to the pressing social and political issues of the day to the benefit of the *polis*' in the final stages of the Peloponnesian War, after the Athenian defeat in Sicily in 413 B.C.? That is one of the questions which the organisers of this conference invite us to consider. One aspect of the topic which they highlight is whether 'by regularly promoting examples of public-spirited and capable figures of authority, Greek drama provided the people of Athens with a civic understanding of their own good' in this period. Under this heading, I will discuss the presentation of Theseus in Sophocles' last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, produced by his homonymous grandson in 401 after the author's death in late 406.

Theseus is unusual among major characters in Sophocles, in that he seems a paragon of virtue. This uncontroversial point scarcely needs illustration. Theseus treats the blind beggar Oedipus with respect, and makes good on his promise to protect him even though this involves him in a conflict with Thebes. Oedipus could not wish for a more attentive and amenable host, and repeatedly asks the gods to bless him. It is hard to think of any other character in late tragedy who is as unambiguously admirable.¹ Moreover, Theseus is not just any character: he is the leader of Athens, and its most famous ruler during the heroic period. If Sophocles intended to

I am grateful to Professor Alan Sommerstein for helpful comments.

¹ Markantonatos (2007) 90 describes him as 'well-versed in the exigencies of state-politics, wielding an irresistible divinely sanctioned power by the sheer force of unbending justice and by the unflinching display of sincere concern for wronged refugees.' According to Jebb (1900) xxvi, 'this typical Athenian is more than a walking king; he is a soldier bred in the school of adversity, loyal to gods and men, perfect in courtesy, but stern at need'.

portray characters with the aim of encouraging civic solidarity and wise leadership during the traumatic final years of the Peloponnesian War, it is hard to see a better candidate than the mythical king of Athens as represented in this drama.²

I see two chief ways in which Theseus could work as a political model. The former is descriptive: Theseus provides a mythical exemplar of the kind of leadership which Athens received in Sophocles' own day, and thus supports and validates the attitude and behaviour of contemporary politicians. The latter is protreptic: Sophocles wants his audience to reflect on the difference between Theseus and their leaders, and to learn to follow the advice of people who emulated Theseus' justice and wisdom.³ Most of us, I imagine, on reading the comic poets and Thucydides, would think the latter hypothesis more plausible. They are not mutually exclusive, however; Sophocles may have believed that some political leaders were closer than others to the ideal represented by Theseus. Implied criticism of present leaders might be accompanied by implied praise of past ones: some scholars, for example, have seen Periclean elements in the presentation of Theseus.⁴

² Cf. Markantonatos (2007) 166, according to whom 'the inspiring image of an enlightened Theseus working in close collaboration with the Athenian citizens for the welfare of the state would have served as a powerful paradigm of communal consensus and perceptive governance' (also p. 213).

³ Blundell (1993) 299 argues for a similar contrast between the real Athens and the play's presentation of Athens: 'this historical context [i.e. the last part of the Peloponnesian War] suggests that the Athens of the drama should be interpreted as a normative ideal, an implicit appeal for reaffirmation of the legendary virtues of the past.' For accounts of the praise of Athens in the play see Grethlein (2003) 282-8, Markantonatos (2007) 157-67.

⁴ Blundell (1993) 300 associates Theseus with Pericles' 'rational control over the emotional and fickle demos' (citing Thuc. 2.65). Markantonatos (2007) 100 refers to 1139-44 as 'this truly Periclean turn of phrase, spoken as it

There is no direct way of testing this hypothesis. Sophocles has left no record of his intentions other than the play itself; nor do we have an account of the reaction of any member of the audience. To some good scholars it will seem plausible, to others it will not. In the remainder of this essay, I consider five points which influence my attitude to it.

1. Sophocles' tragedy is not the first to employ Theseus as a major character. Among surviving tragedies, he has a significant part in Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428), *Supplices* (c. 424-420),⁵ and *Heracles* (c. 415); he also appears in several fragmentary tragedies, including Aeschylus' *Eleusinians*.⁶ These plays may provide a useful control on the presentation of Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Has it changed? After all, the question which we are asking is whether this play shows '*increased* [my italics] responsiveness to the pressing social and political issues of the day to the benefit of the *polis*' in the final stages of the Peloponnesian War. If we can identify a similar level of responsiveness in an earlier play, we have falsified the hypothesis, at least for this character in this drama.

I will concentrate on *Supplices*, which is particularly relevant because it shares a story pattern with *OC*. A suppliant arrives at a city and requests assistance; the city is Athens, its ruler

is by the first celebrated leader of an Athenian proto-democracy, [which] forms the conclusion and the climax of Athens' severe but successful test in piety and humanity.'

⁵ I do not need to discuss here the question of whether Euripides' play was performed after, and under the influence of, the Battle of Delium in November 424. See Collard (1990) = (2007) 138 for a cautionary modern parallel which shows that we cannot be sure that the battle came first; and *id.* (2007) 139-40 for an account of recent studies on the subject, to which now add Morwood (2007) 26-30, Storey (2008) 23-8.

⁶ See Mills (1997) 229-34.

Theseus. In *Supplices*, Theseus initially refuses Adrastus' supplication (195-249), before giving way to the pleas of his mother Aethra (286-331). Such a reversal is unusual, but hardly turns that play's protagonist into an unattractive character. Rather, the young Theseus shows his capacity for learning and development, thereby contrasting with the young men of the Seven whose mistakes led to disaster.⁷ Having made his decision to guarantee the burial, he is swift and determined in carrying it out. He rebukes a Theban herald who insults him and his city. He makes a decisive intervention in the ensuing battle between the two cities, and on achieving his objective prevents his troops from sacking the city. When the bodies are brought on stage, he gives good advice to Adrastus, preventing the mothers from embracing the corpses of their sons. Throughout he shows firmness, intelligence, and compassion.⁸ If the Theseus of *Oedipus Coloneus* is a good political model, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the Theseus of *Supplices* is too. Yet the latter play was performed some fifteen to twenty years earlier: well before the closing stages of the Peloponnesian War.

Aeschylus' *Eleusinians* deals with the same story as *Supplices*; we know almost nothing about it, other than that Theseus recovers the bodies by persuading the Thebans to release them

⁷ Thus Storey (2008) 93-5; cf. Morwood (2007) 8. Complementary explanations are available. According to Collard (1975) on 87-262 (ii. 132), '87-262 show the apparent justification *in political reason* for the refusal, so that in the *volte face* brought about by Ae<thra> Th<eseus>' acceptance of the supplication may stand out the more strongly as a gesture of unalloyed altruism'. One might add that since in *OC* Oedipus comes to Athens promising great benefits to its inhabitants, his reception must be immediate, so that Theseus does not seem to have been influenced by anything other than generosity. Euripides' Adrastus, a broken man, has nothing to offer Theseus; the dramatist can thus delay the moment of acceptance without calling the king's motivation into question.

⁸ See 403-8, 426-62, 513-63, 707-18, 723-5, 941-7.

(Radt (1985) 175). In that play, too, Theseus presumably possessed many good qualities; whether he was 'as good as' the Theseus of the later dramas is impossible to say, but it would be reckless to deny that he could have been.

From the certain parallel of *Supplikes*, and the possible parallel of *Eleusinians*, I conclude that we cannot attribute the positive presentation of Theseus in *Oedipus Coloneus* to an increased sense of crisis at the end of the Peloponnesian War. The same character had already been presented in similar terms at a much earlier stage in that conflict, and perhaps also decades before it had even begun.

2. To what extent is Theseus is presented as an idealised figure? Asking this does not nullify my earlier promise not to exemplify the obvious: I am not going to spend time expounding Theseus' virtue. From a purely moral perspective, he would be a suitable model for imitation. But does he show the qualities required for victory against Sparta, qualities that Sophocles wished to exemplify because of the particular conditions of the final part of the Peloponnesian War?

I wonder. Defeating Sparta was going to require more than moral virtue, more even than steadfast defence of friends and the swift punishment of wrongdoers. Cunning, resourcefulness, and intelligence would all be needed, but Theseus is not a particularly good exemplar of these qualities. Earlier I quoted Markantonatos's statement that Theseus is 'well-versed in the exigencies of state-politics, wielding an irresistible divinely sanctioned power by the sheer force of unbending justice and by the unfailing display of sincere concern for wronged refugees.' The full quotation runs 'Even though Theseus presents himself as well-versed in the exigencies of

state-politics, wielding an irresistible divinely sanctioned power by the sheer force of unbending justice and by the unfailing display of sincere concern for wronged refugees, he has still much to learn from his knowledgeable interlocutor.⁹ This is a well-balanced account of the presentation of this figure, conveying both his positive qualities and the chief area in which he falls short.

Theseus' knowledge is indeed inferior to that of Oedipus. He cannot imagine that Athens and Thebes could ever come into conflict (606), and has to be informed by Oedipus of the mutability of all mortal affairs (607-28). At the climax of the play, Oedipus interprets the gods' desires and reveals them to his host, who has asked for his guidance (1500-17); the blind Oedipus then leads the seeing Theseus, in a significant reversal of their expected roles (1587-9). Theseus is not to be blamed for not knowing the gods' will, or for showing less understanding than Oedipus. But the ability to interpret oracles and other signs correctly was a boon in an ancient leader.¹⁰ Theseus' complete reliance on Oedipus does not make him an especially good model in this respect.

Just before the end, Theseus agrees to send Antigone back to Thebes to try to mediate between her two brothers (1768-76). This will be, the audience can assume, no more successful than her earlier attempt to persuade Polynices to call off his assault (1414-46). Polynices' death is a fixed point in the myth, and the foreboding which accompanies his departure, caused by the obvious potency of Oedipus' curse, can leave the audience in little doubt that Antigone will fail. If the audience is meant to think of *Antigone* here – a disputed point which I do not argue here – then Theseus' decision to allow Antigone back to Thebes is even more unfortunate, since it is a

⁹ Markantonatos (2007) 90.

¹⁰ Cf. the contrasting cases of Themistocles (Hdt. 7.139-44) and Nicias (Thuc. 7.50.4).

distant, if not proximate, cause of her early death.¹¹ οὐ δέῃ μ' ἀποκόμνειν, he says in his final words (1776), but on this account, at least, he is supporting an unattainable mission, perhaps a doomed one. This would be an odd final picture of a character created for the purpose of encouraging wise leadership and good judgment in the audience. From a moral point of view, Theseus is admirable: he is making a final effort to put a stop to an appalling conflict. But in the context of an existential struggle such as the Peloponnesian War, it is not enough to be moral. One must take account of the possibilities of success, and the potential danger caused by one's decisions to others. Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus* is not an enticing model for someone wrestling with these difficult problems.

From a political point of view, too, Theseus is a problematic exemplar. The key locus for the decisions which would influence the conduct of the war, and the good order of the city, was the democratic assembly. Theseus is far removed from the debates of the democracy, however. An autocrat, he decides on his own authority to accept Oedipus' supplication and to resist Creon's attempt to recover him. Even at the end of the play, Oedipus commits the secret location of his burial to Theseus alone, and Theseus is to pass this message on to his successor only when he himself is close to death. The city's safety is to depend on a fundamentally antidemocratic method of knowledge transmission (1526-35).¹² Put another way, nothing in this play suggests that it was written in a democracy. If we had to rely on this play alone for our knowledge of

¹¹ See Stinton (1986) 71, 90 = (1990) 460-1, 488, Bernard (2001) 159-68.

¹² Contrast the emphasis on freedom of information implied by the Athenian 'epigraphic habit', and Theseus' association of written law with civic equality at Eur. *Suppl.* 433-4.

contemporary Athenian political organisation, we might be inclined to think the reverse, since it is the hypocritical Creon, not Theseus, who claims to have a democratic mandate.¹³

This could have been different. Across a range of poetic and prose texts, Athenians present Theseus as simultaneously king and democrat – often the founder of the democracy.¹⁴ In Euripides' *Supplikes*, Theseus emphasises that he will formally request popular approval of his decision to ensure the burial of the Seven against Thebes (349-55), and later defends Athenian democracy after an attack from a Theban herald, angrily disclaiming the title of ruler (513-63). Further afield, in Aeschylus' *Supplikes* the Argive king Pelasgus cannot receive the Danaids until he persuades the δῆμος in a meeting probably modelled on the Athenian assembly (368-9, 517-19, 600-24). Tragedians insert anachronistically democratic elements into their depictions of the heroic world, if that was required by the type of plot which they wished to construct. We find no such elements in *Oedipus at Colonus*,¹⁵ even though their inclusion would have enabled a closer connexion between Theseus and the world of the audience.

It is almost as if, by distancing his play from previous handling of suppliant myths by his fellow-tragedians, Sophocles has gone out of his way to obstruct easy connexions between his character and contemporary concerns. Had Sophocles wanted to create a character relevant to 'the pressing social and political issues of the day' (in the words of the conference programme), it is hard to imagine that he could not have come up with something more relevant. Finally, taking Theseus as a model runs the risk of skewing the balance of the play. Despite his frequent

¹³ See n. 17 below.

¹⁴ See Diggle (2004) on Theophr. *Char.* 26.5, Morwood (2007) 8-9.

¹⁵ As Jouanna (2007) 184 points out.

appearances and substantial speaking part, Theseus has a hard time of commanding the audience's attention in the way that Oedipus does. If Theseus was to serve as a model for members of the audience, it is surprising that Sophocles put so much effort into portraying Oedipus, a less suitable subject for imitation, who so overshadows his more moral and, frankly, less interesting fellow-character.

3. In the previous section I discussed how Sophocles distances his play and characters from contemporary Athenian domestic matters. In this section I take a similar approach to his presentation of foreign affairs.

One of Athens's chief enemies in the Peloponnesian War was Thebes, the city from which Oedipus has been banished. When Creon, its leader, comes to recover Oedipus on behalf of his native city, he begins with lavish praise of Athens, but is soon found to be a hypocrite employing violence and deceit in pursuit of a twisted goal. The Athenian king, Theseus, successfully defends Oedipus from Theban treachery. There could, one might think, scarcely be a plotline more suitable for cheering a patriotic Athenian audience and strengthening their morale as they continued their struggle against the evil Thebans. The implied analogy between the play and reality would powerfully reinforce the idea that Theseus was to be taken as an ideal model: he overcomes the Theban enemy, just as Athens's leaders should.

With this in mind, we should consider Theseus' words to Creon, after the latter's deception has been laid bare (911-31):

δέδρακας οὐτ' ἐμοῦ κατάξια

οὐθ' ὦν πέφυκας αὐτὸς οὔτε σῆς χθονός,
 ὅστις δίκαι' ἀσκοῦσαν εἰσελθὼν πόλιν
 κ' ἄνευ νόμου κραίνουσιν οὐδέν, εἴτ' ἀφείς
 τὰ τῆσδε τῆς γῆς κύρι' ὦδ' ἐπεσπεσὼν 915
 ἄγεις θ' ἃ χρήζεις καὶ παρίστασαι βίᾳ·
 καί μοι πόλιν κένανδρον ἢ δούλην τινὰ
 ἔδοξας εἶναι, καμ' ἴσον τῷ μηδενί.
καίτοι σε Θῆβαί γ' οὐκ ἐπαίδευσαν κακόν·
οὐ γὰρ φιλοῦσιν ἄνδρας ἐκδίκους τρέφειν, 920
οὐδ' ἂν σ' ἐπαινέσειαν, εἰ πυθοίαιτο
συλῶντα τὰμὰ καὶ τὰ τῶν θεῶν, βίᾳ
ἄγοντα φωτῶν ἀθλίων ἱκτήρια.
 οὐκουν ἔγωγ' ἂν σῆς ἐπεμβαίνων χθονός,
 οὐδ' εἰ τὰ πάντων εἶχον ἐνδικώτατα, 925
 ἄνευ γε τοῦ κραίνοντος, ὅστις ἦν, χθονὸς
 οὐθ' εἶλκον οὔτ' ἂν ἦγον, ἀλλ' ἠπιστάμην
 ξένον παρ' ἀστοῖς ὥς διαιτᾶσθαι χρεών.
σὺ δ' ἀξίαν οὐκ οὔσαν αἰσχύνης πόλιν
τὴν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ, καί σ' ὁ πληθύων χρόνος 930
 γέρονθ' ὁμοῦ τίθησι καὶ τοῦ νοῦ κενόν.

These words are startling.¹⁶ Sophocles goes out of his way to have Theseus dissociate Creon from the rest of the Thebans, when it would have been easy to present the hypocrite as representative of his people.¹⁷ The distinction that he draws is immediately reinforced by the chorus.¹⁸ We may contrast two Euripidean plays. In *Heraclidae*, a Herald arrives at Marathon, sent by Eurystheus to bring the Heraclidae back to Argos; he even attempts to remove his quarry by force, and is only repulsed by the intervention first of the chorus, and then of Theseus' sons Demophon and Acamas. At no point is Eurystheus' attitude distinguished from that of Argos. On the contrary, the Herald states that the Heraclidae have incurred the enmity of both;¹⁹ Iolaus, their companion and supporter, reveals that they are in exile thanks to a vote of the Argive citizenry (185-6). Demophon's final words to the Herald put the matter beyond doubt:

φθείρου· τὸ σὸν γὰρ Ἄργος οὐ δέδοικ' ἐγώ·
 ἐνθένδε δ' οὐκ ἔμελλες αἰσχύνεσθαι ἐμὲ
 ἄξιον βίᾳ τούσδ'· οὐ γὰρ Ἀργείων πόλιν
 ὑπήκοον τήνδ' ἀλλ' ἐλευθέραν ἔχω. (284-7)

¹⁶ Cf. Blundell (1993) 301: 'This magnanimous and conciliatory spirit strikes an extraordinary note for the Athens of 406 BC.'

¹⁷ Creon claims to be οὐκ ἐξ ἑνὸς στείλαντος, ἀλλ' ἀστῶν ὑπὸ | πάντων κελευσθείς (737-8), and tells Oedipus πᾶς σε Καδμείων λεῶς | καλεῖ δικαίως, ἐκ δὲ τῶν μάλιστα ἐγώ (741-2), but 'there is nothing to implicate the rest of the Thebans in the deceit and violence [which Creon] has chosen as his means' (Blundell (1993) 304).

¹⁸ 937-8 ὅρᾳς ἴν' ἦκεις, ὦ ξέν'; ὥς ἀφ' ὧν μὲν εἰ | φάνη δίκαιος, δρῶν δ' ἐφευρίσκη κακά.

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. ταῦτ' οὐ δοκῆσει τοῖς Μυκηναίοις ἴσως (261), οὐ βούλομαί σε πόλεμον Ἀργείοις ἔχειν (265).

So too in *Supplices*. Since the Theban Herald emphasises that his city is a monarchy, and pours scorn on Athens's democratic constitution (409-25), he could easily have attributed the decision to deny burial to the Argive champions to Creon alone, not the city. In fact, he draws no distinction between tyrant and city on this matter, and emphasises that the people of Thebes forbid the burial.²⁰ The Thebans then fight against Theseus' army, with no suggestion that they are doing so unwillingly; when Adrastus learns of their defeat, he remarks on how the Κάδμου κακόφρων λαός (744) is reaping the reward for its insolent behaviour. Here too, then, city and ruler are at one in their outrageous actions. If one could generalise from these two plays, one might almost talk of a generic expectation which Sophocles here defies. That probably goes too far: rather, we can say that Euripides' treatments show (as we might have guessed) that there was no need for Sophocles to dissociate ruler and city.

Scholars react in different ways to this pro-Theban line. Lachmann takes it as support for his thesis that the play was composed before the start of the Peloponnesian War, and performed in 431.²¹ Karl Hermann deletes the lines, regarding them as an interpolation by Sophocles' grandson aimed at reflecting the changed political situation in 401.²² Dernhard argues that the

²⁰ 467-7 ἐγὼ δ' ἀπαυδῶ πᾶς τε Κάδμειος λεῶς | "Ἀδραστον ἐς γῆν τήνδε μὴ παριέναι.

²¹ Lachmann (1827) 326-7 = (1876) 29.

²² Hermann (1837) 43. He refers to the relevant passages on p. 41 n. 16 as '919, 928, 938', which I take to mean '919-23, 929-30, 937-8'. Thebes sheltered Athenian refugees from the Thirty Tyrants (Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.1-2, Plut. *Lys.* 27.5), who ruled after Sophocles' death but before the production of the play. So there was at least a motive for inserting pro-Theban references, but the ones we find are too integrated into the speech as a whole to result from interpolation. Moreover, it was not long before the Thirty that the Thebans had wanted to raze Athens to the ground (Plut. *Lys.* 15.3-4), and this, in the minds of many, may have still overshadowed their more recent assistance.

Theban populace of this period was well-disposed towards the Athenians, and only its leaders were hostile; the latter are thus represented by Creon, while Theseus' praise of Thebes as a whole acknowledges their affection for Athens.²³ According to Wilamowitz, Sophocles is commending a pro-Theban party within Athens itself.²⁴

More recently, Zeitlin refers to the passage only at the very end of her influential paper on the tragic Thebes as a kind of 'anti-Athens', arguing that 'here we know better than this kind and simple king of Athens, and so, I suggest, should the spectators.'²⁵ Theseus is not omniscient, and so could be wrong about Thebes. But no-one contradicts him; nor are the obviously exceptional cases of Eteocles, Polynices, and perhaps Oedipus himself (who was born in Thebes, but brought up in Corinth, and so might not count) sufficient to disprove his assertion. Indeed, even from that troubled family, Antigone and Ismene are models of patience and humility. We cannot explain away this speech by claiming that Theseus is simply mistaken.²⁶ Zeitlin is forced to make this claim because of her view that Thebes functions as an 'anti-Athens' in tragedy. As I do not share this belief, I am not compelled to follow her.

²³ Denhard (1830) 30-3.

²⁴ Wilamowitz *ap.* Tycho von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1917) 368-9.

²⁵ Zeitlin (1986) 141 = (1990) 167.

²⁶ Cf. Easterling (1989) 14: 'It will hardly do to say that Theseus is just "kind and simple", a naive fellow who doesn't understand evil when he sees it. It is Theseus, after all, who is quite ready to suspect that there will be Athenians involved in conspiracy with Creon (1028-33)'; see further *ibid.* 11-14. Taplin (1999) 50-1 is also sceptical of Zeitlin's argument, pointing out that there is 'plenty of favourable localization' of Thebes in Aeschylus' *Septem*, and Euripides' *Phoenissae* and *Heracles*.

Hall, by contrast, ignores the lines in her account of the play as ‘a mythical explanation for the near-permanent hostility between the “real” city-states of Athens and Thebes in historical times’.²⁷ Her reference to ‘the citizens of the much-hated city of Thebes’ does not specify the hater. Presumably she means the audience of the play, although they had found Thebes an ally against the Thirty, as mentioned above, and so some of them may have been better-disposed to that city than were most Athenians at the time of Sophocles’ death.²⁸ She cannot mean the characters within the play, except Oedipus himself.²⁹

Blundell’s explanation is an improvement on the approaches which we have considered so far, in that she does not invent historical information to explain the lines, or simply ignore them. For her, Theseus’ generous tribute to Thebes is a ‘tacit reproach to contemporary Athens’,³⁰ which is involved in a war with Thebes thanks to her imperial ambitions. Theseus’ Athens, she writes, ‘minds its own business, respecting authority and law abroad as well as at home and refraining from flouting such authorities even under the banner of justice’ (citing 924-8); ‘the play foreshadows the constant need to defend the land of Attica from enemy incursions. But it offers no legendary justification for the imperialist expansion which provoked fear and

²⁷ Hall (1997) 102.

²⁸ This raises an important point about the audience of the play. Which audience should we aim to investigate: the actual audience who viewed the performance in 401, four not uneventful years after Sophocles’ death, and who thus came to the theatre with a world-view partly influenced by events which Sophocles could not have predicted; or the ‘ideal’ audience as presumably imagined by Sophocles himself, perhaps at a performance in 405 which never actually took place? For most questions it does not matter, but for attitudes to Thebes it does.

²⁹ For Oedipus’ hatred of Thebes cf. 525-6, Knox (1983) 22-3.

³⁰ Blundell (1993) 303.

hostility in Sparta and elsewhere'.³¹ We can hardly say, however, that Sophocles wanted his audience to conclude from the play that they should abandon their empire; even if he believed such a thing, it is difficult to imagine many Athenians coming to that view as a result of watching the play. People are good at characterising enemy incursions as unprovoked attacks, and their own incursions into other states as justified and reluctant interventions. More likely, spectators would have condemned Creon's behaviour, but refused to map it on to Athens's relationship with other Greek states – as well they might, since the parallel is far from exact. The play neither validates nor criticises the empire: the empire is not at issue.

We would do better to consider the function of the lines within the play itself. Burian plausibly suggests that the praises make Creon even more villainous: he 'violates not only Athenian law, but precepts that Thebes and all of Greece respect'.³² As for contemporary interstate relations, I am inclined to agree with Mills that 'in what he says about Thebes, Sophocles takes care to distance himself from the contemporary'.³³ He makes it difficult to map

³¹ Blundell (1993) 300, 300-1; cf. lines 1004, 1534-5. Contrast Hall (2007) 278: 'Presumably, during the process by which tragedy metastasised over the entire Greek-speaking world, it became inappropriate for its content to be so explicitly designed to glorify Athens, create aetiologies for Attic cults, or validate Athens' right to govern other city-states (as *Eumenides* did, and *Heraclidae* and arguably Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*)'. Hall does not argue her case, and so I cannot explore her basis for this assertion; but I doubt whether any of these plays validates Athenian imperialism.

³² Burian (1974) 420. Cf. Reinhardt (1947) 222 ≈ (1979) 213 'Creon ... is measured against the true *Thebes*, whose nature he has falsified; the law is sacred – not only the law of Athens but that of the other city and of every other city ... here we have a confrontation between the height of respect and total lack of respect'.

³³ Mills (1997) 185.

the world of the play, and its characters, onto the world of contemporary Athens. Internal dramatic considerations take precedence over political allegory. This should give us pause before we conclude that Theseus is presented as a model for contemporary Athenian leaders. If such a presentation was Sophocles' intention, it is astonishing that he made it so difficult for an audience to pick up on it.

I conclude with two briefer arguments which could be applied to other characters and plays as well as Theseus in *Oedipus Coloneus*.

4. Attic tragedy often presents Athens in a good light, whether across whole plays (e.g. Euripides' *Supplikes*, on which more below), or by occasional references (e.g. Soph. *El.* 731-3).³⁴ It is fair to assume that a largely Athenian audience would have appreciated these references. So just because Theseus is presented in a positive light, we cannot connect this with a crisis caused by the Peloponnesian War. Such presentations occurred too frequently to have such a specific meaning.

5. I wonder whether it is appropriate to think in terms of a national crisis during the time that Sophocles was writing this play. The battle of Aegospotami took place in the summer of 405, just a few months after Sophocles' death, and resulted in the effective end of Athens's

³⁴ Compare the occasional brief references in praise of Athens in tragedy, for which cf. Socrates *ap.* Arist. *Rhet.* 1367^b8-9 οὐ χαλεπὸν Ἀθηναίους ἐν Ἀθηναίοις ἐπαινεῖν, Pl. *Menex.* 235d, Quint. *Inst.* 3.7.23-4, Parker (1997) 150 n. 27.

chances of defeating Sparta. But in late 406 Athens was far from finished. It had just overcome the Spartan fleet at Arginusae in what one scholar calls ‘a magnificent victory in the largest battle ever fought between Greek navies’,³⁵ even if the failure of the Athenian generals to recover their survivors led to a period of extreme acrimony. The Spartans sued for peace in its aftermath.³⁶ The disastrous end to the Sicilian expedition had not, it appeared, fatally compromised its chances of victory. Fighting might have gone on for years to come. If the Athenian generals had been just a little more careful at Aegospotami, where their fleet was annihilated, the war might not have ended until, say, 395. In that case, we might now be taking the period 405-395 as the last, agonised, decade of the conflict, and seeing 407 and 406, when Sophocles was presumably writing the play, as a comparative high-point.

This has been a sceptical discussion, and at first my conclusion seems wholly negative: I have taken a plausible argument and attempted to show why I do not agree with it. Scholars who disagree with me will, I hope, welcome my scepticism; after all, if a theory is true, it should be able to withstand criticism, and if that criticism is not forthcoming, it will go untested. Moreover, if I am right and Sophocles was not concerned to encourage good leadership and civic solidarity in his portrayal of Theseus, that is itself a significant statement about the play. As I said at the beginning of this essay, the case of Theseus is *prima facie* a likely candidate, perhaps the most likely candidate, for such encouragement. If we agree that in fact, he does not fall under this rubric, we may not have disproved the overall hypothesis with regard to Sophocles – the ‘one-

³⁵ Kagan (1987) 352.

³⁶ [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 34.1; cf. Kagan (1987) 376-9.

case induction method' does not suffice to do that – but we have at least brought it into doubt. And such doubt may well be salutary at a time when a considerable, perhaps excessive, fraction of scholarly work on Sophocles is devoted to attempts to see his work in more or less political terms.

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